

THE ART AND CRAFT OF LETTERS
CRITICISM by P. P. HOWE

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P. P. HOWE

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I

THE critic is the middleman in the industry of the arts, whose "pull" is ordinarily limited, but whose credit and goodwill are what he can make them. It is easy to say that the system is complete without him, since it has the producers on the one hand and the consumers on the other ; and this is to deny the critic's function. But the critic's part is not predatory, as we shall see ; his function is to move the appreciation of art from where it is less capable, to where it is more capable, of satisfying human wants ; and he is thus quite strictly and definitely a creator of wealth in the republic.

And yet the critic will do well to forgo the claim of the creative artist. The labour of production, both direct and indirect, has been expended before he plays his part ; he deals not in the raw materials, as the artist does, but in the finished commodities. You may say, if you like, that since the processes are superficially

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the same, the one is equally an artist with the other. Thus "Without the critical faculty," said Oscar Wilde, "there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name." It is true that the attitude of the artist towards life is closely paralleled by that of the critic towards art ; the business of both is imaginative reflexion, the passing of material through the medium of personality. But the difference of material is so radical that we may well mark our sense of it by a difference in the allocation of function, and in the use of terms. Let us say at once that the activity of one is primary, that of the other secondary. To put the thing quite simply and finally : if in the industry of the arts all the processes which are extractive and manufacturing were to be brought to a standstill, we should have no art ; but if the process which is distributive were to cease, there might be a glut here and a famine there, but there would be art if we went out to find it. The critic is the man who goes out to find art ; his craft is *distributive* ; and we may test him strictly by his contribution to the general product.

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It is possible to be an artist within a craft. We may see, if we choose, the critic as the regulator ; applying the stimulus of his enlightened enthusiasm at such points in the productive organism as his judgment leads him to believe will be profitable ; justifying himself always (for the critic must live) by his added share in the general produce of human enjoyment. If the critic take without giving, then is he predatory. If he be merely a small flea upon a larger flea, then let us join with those who say, Away with him. And since one part of our task is that of reconciliation (since the critic has been through all history the Rogue-critic), let us now abandon the metaphor which has been economic ; for even if there have not been those who from the outset have been anxious to deny that between the industrial system and that of the arts there is any likeness, it is a poor ground upon which to court sympathy. It is possible to be an artist within a craft, and the critic whom we love has ever been an artist. “ I would rather be a man of disinterested taste and liberal feeling,” said Hazlitt, “ to see and acknowledge truth and

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beauty wherever I found it, than a man of greater and more original genius, to hate, envy, and deny all excellence but my own—but that poor scanty pittance of it (compared with the whole) which I had myself produced ! ” There we have the critic : the man whose genius is less, while his charity is more (for original genius is but rarely unselfish) ; the man, above all, whose concern is with the whole, as that of the man who is himself doing a part can hardly be ; the man who, by his very independence of the makers of art, is all the nearer to ourselves. The critic is the ideal spectator who has by an accident become vocal ; the accident may be, as in the case of Hazlitt, or Lamb, the accident of genius, albeit of a secondary kind ; but it is a kind of genius that to the millions of his fellows in the audience is peculiarly endearing.

For while the impulses to art are perhaps two, the impulse of acceptance and the impulse of inquiry—(they have been so defined by Mr. Watts-Dunton)—the impulse against art is the impulse of inertia, or the absence of impulse. Of this inertia the critic is the enemy. He is

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athirst for surprise. He is the specialist in reasoned admiration. The critical attitude has on no occasion been better defined than in these unconscious words of Sir Thomas Browne : “ The wisdom of God receives small honour from those vulgar heads that rudely stare about, and with a gross rusticity admire His works ; those highly magnify Him, whose judicious inquiry into His acts, and deliberate research into His creatures, return the duty of a devout and learned admiration.” There we are presented with the anti-thesis between those capable of surprise and the unsurprisable. For the unsurprisable, there is no art ; “ theirs is the word of a bovine to-day.” They comply with Plato’s definition, in that they can neither see beauty in itself, nor follow those who would lead them to it.

Let us suppose that the pleasures of art are two ; the pleasure of surprise, or call it Wonder (with Mr. Watts-Dunton) if you like, and the pleasure of recognition. In all art we may then find the presence of one or other, or of both, of these designs upon the citadel of our imagination. There is a quiet, close approach,

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of a nice encircling warmth, the sign of whose achieved conquest is that we let down our defences with a “Yes, that is life as we live it.” There is another, more terrible or glorious march, with wonders at every corner and the sudden leaping of swift flame. “To think that life can hold all that!” is the sign manual of our capitulation. Recognition is itself a form of surprise, seen on its homely side ; if we make the differentiation, it is for convenience. It is a pleasure to man to see himself ; it is a pleasure to man to see himself as he has never known that he might be.

Now the critic is the specialist in both these pleasures ; the one is not too small, nor the other too great, for him. His business is that of judicious inquiry ; but not of judicial inquiry. He sits in no closed court, but walks on the highway with his face turned to the wind which bloweth where it listeth. He is as ready as Don Quixote or Mr. Adams for the adventure which may befall him in the least new bend of the road. He is all the better for being one of your common men, who remembers kindly

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his home ; but he must be one among the number who are “not incurious in God’s handiwork.” He must have purchased his experience in no other way than the artist, and that is in Moth’s way in the comedy, by his pennyweight of observation. But he is free of the artist’s burden, which is the obligation to create. The disability of the creative artist is very much like a woman’s, and it is a wonder that someone has not proposed he should be disfranchised for it. The critic walks free of the twenty volumes folio which are upon the back of the artist, and free of the burden of the future with which his fellow-traveller is big. In front of him is the open country and a thousand roads ; by the side of him is his fair cudgel-prop in his strong right hand ; and in his pocket the sanction of custom and authority that his is an honourable calling. As we think of the critic, we recall the words of Scripture : “Whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive ; whom he would he raised up, and whom he would he put down.” His word is the word of Shakespeare’s cheerful executioner : “ You must be so good, sir, as to

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rise and be put to death." He is the humble-bee, that makes his little noise in the world, and owes nothing to any man. You might call the critic a very lucky fellow, if it were not for what follows after.

For the critic *has* his obligation ; and that (as we have seen) is to put as much into the pot as he takes out of it. The critic is called upon, at each of those turns in the road that we have found so delightful, to perform a very difficult and a very delicate act of surrender ; and that is the act of self-surrender. Nor is that statement quite the end of the matter, for his devout duty is the rendering up of all the sensible and percipient man without the relaxation of his identity. It is no act of faith, this ; the business is no believing, confessing, affirming, swearing, and maintaining of a Dulcinea del Toboso ; no comfortable surrender to a Higher Authority ; for the highest authority *is* the critic's own soul. The idea of a soul surrendered into safe keeping carries with it the idea of an Index Librorum Prohibitorum ; and, for the critic, there can be no Index Librorum Prohibitorum.

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Without irreverence it may be claimed for the critic that it is he who by giving his own soul, saves it. The Christian paradox is also the paradox of good criticism. For the demand made by a work of art upon the spectator is always the demand for self-surrender: except ye become as one of these ye cannot enter in. The child, with his whole soul issuing from his eyes to meet the told story half-way, is the type of the audience art always demands. And his soul, whether he be looking at a picture or reading a book, is what the critic has got to lend out of him. That is a very exhausting experience! But there you are, art does make its demands. It is often very tiresome, but it does. And right in the forefront of critical qualifications one would put this faculty of self-surrender—of abject, and yet of qualified, self-surrender. But before we amplify the qualification, let us give definition to our critic (who is at present a somewhat speculative figure, an Ariel still confined within his oak) by pointing out how rare is this faculty of his. There is no person more infrequently met with than the person who has

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really read a book. “Had a go at it ?” Yes. “Derived enjoyment from it ?” Oh, certainly ! But the act of reading is an act of giving as well as of receiving. There are books of the greatest beauty and of the highest possibility of pleasure which are extremely hard to read. One has to give one’s self up to them, that is ; and they go on asking for such a lot of one’s self ! It is not a question, of course, of the aloof or the recondite (although even here it is the critic’s business, if he undertake to deliver judgment, to make the protracted plunge). Where the form of a book is incidental and repetitive, as in the old romances of the road, you may read as you run or even run as you read ; but where the form is integral and organic, as in the modern novel, it is probable—if the book is *The Brothers Karamazov*—that you should take a week off for the job. That is one way of putting the case, an extreme way. It would be equally clear, and perhaps more persuasive, to remark how the theatre can obviously give you nothing unless you give three consecutive hours of your time to the theatre. And even then, you must not

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hold fast to your box of chocolates or to the thought of your last train, or the theatre can give you very little. The critic is the person who holds fast to something, as we shall see in a moment, but who holds fast to nothing of his understanding soul. He must not "hang back," nor find himself at war 'twixt will and will not. It is probable that Voltaire was holding fast to the classical tradition when he found Shakespeare to be a great fool with superb moments. It is probable that the *Daily Mail* was lacking in the faculty of self-surrender when it said the other day that Dostoevsky was a tedious madman whose admirers talked pretentious nonsense.

What is it then to which the critic holds even while he performs his appointed task of self-abasement? He holds fast to his values. But what are they, and whence do they come? Are they inborn, or has he learned them; is his mother's knee the seat of them, or has he found them at Aristotle's feet?¹ It might be said, in

¹ When we consider the use that has been made of Aristotle, it is amusing to remember him on the artist's so-called "standard of correctness." "If he has represented a horse as throwing out both his off legs at once," we read in the *Poetics*, "the error is not essential to the poetry."

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the manner of Mr. Bernard Shaw, that the best scheme of values is that there are no schemes of values. But we hesitate to say that when we remember the critic for the halfpenny papers who walks daily in his garden, who met Shakespeare there on Monday, Homer on Tuesday, and who may quite well meet God before the end of the week. The critic must have his sense of values, even if they be not a scheme. It was Matthew Arnold's opinion that the critic acquired his values by diligent experience. "Knowledge, and ever fresh knowledge, must be the critic's great concern for himself." The function of criticism according to Arnold—the disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world—leaves surely something out of its account. It is one thing to tell a man that a knowledge of his country's literature assiduously persevered in, together with the mastery of at least one literature that is foreign, will make him a critic ; but it is another to give him our love and belief when he goes into practice. For we know that the critic who seals us of his company has something more than

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accomplishment. Molière's Don Juan, a gentleman who only believes that two and two make four, and that four and four are eight, is not the perfect critic. A critic is not a merely learned man, or there would be as many critics as there have been scholars. The best critic may even be a man who is not learned. Hazlitt, as learning goes, was not a learned man ; his culture was intensive, and it is probable that its margins were soon reached. It is even likely that Gifford was a more learned man ; Gifford, the summit of whose attainments is to have borne a hand in killing Keats. What Hazlitt had was an exquisite sensibility, and unconquerable *sense*. Where did he get these things ? Did he learn them ? Well, we know, on his own word, that for eight years he could do nothing right, and despaired of ever so much as covering a single sheet of paper with the simple thing he wished to say. For eight years he could do nothing right, and for the rest of his life he could do nothing (or nearly nothing) wrong. But was the critic *made* in these eight years ?—made as millionaires are made, we are told, out of charity

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boys and presidents out of peasants. One does not think so. One fancies the critic has to be born, like his betters. What Hazlitt had to acquire, if he may be believed, is the means of self-expression ; but he had not to acquire his *self* in order to have something to express.

We have come, then, to the point at which we see the critical paradox in terms of the self which is at once surrendered and retained. You may say that it is nothing but the paradox of all creation, by which the artist gives himself to life and a woman to her lover. But while it is the same, we may adhere to our standpoint from which we see it to be different. If the nature of the artist and the critic are one in kind, then we may expect the artists to be the best critics. But the artists are not the best critics. There comes a point in the career of the creative artist when he can read with patience no books but his own ; when to look upon another's pictures is a disturbance. And this is quite right. He has performed his act of surrender in regard to life, and we cannot ask that he should perform it again in regard to art—in regard to someone

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else's art. The artist's proper concern is with his own. We might almost say that the subjective consideration of art is the artist's, the objective is the critic's. He who is immersed in what concerns person or place, says Emerson wisely, cannot see the problem of existence. Tolstoy is an admirable artist ; but when Tolstoy sets himself to tell us what is art, he tells us nothing but the measure of his inability to read his contemporaries' books, to look at their pictures, and to listen to their music. In other words, Tolstoy is a bad critic. Nor is Tolstoy alone in this respect among creative artists ; and we shall find ourselves confronting later on the artist as critic as one of our secular abuses. The critic as artist may be all very well ; but the artist as critic is frequently the devil. That was part of what Matthew Arnold meant when he said that at all costs criticism must keep itself free of the practical spirit.

We have defined the critic's function ; by marking some at least of his specialised qualities we have perhaps defined the man. We have seen him as the chartered libertine of letters,

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walking at his will in the ways of the world ; as the gay agent that carries the pollen from flower to flower, lest any one may fail to be infected. For him it may be the unsubdued forest on the one day, and the sweet enclosed garden on the morrow. But we have seen also that this is not the butterfly existence that we perhaps thought it ; he also, in this world of ours, walks with a pack upon his back. And now we may turn to another aspect of the matter.

II

IT was Fielding who remarked that a newspaper was still a newspaper, since it consists of just the same number of words whether there is any news in it or not. It is the same with a novel, which is still a novel if it attain by any means to the customary six-shilling length and if its covers do but hold it together. And it is the same with criticism, which consists of just the same number of words whether there be any sense in them or not. How, then, are we to begin to discriminate, in this flood and turmoil of printed matter which has our generation up to the neck, and which has gone nigh to submerge it ? We may sigh, with Pope, for Horace :

Such once were critics ; such the happy few
Athens and Rome in better ages knew,

or we may sit down to settle our own troubles.

It cannot be too often repeated that Anybody can say Something about Anything. Those are words which, if I had my way, I would put

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up where Oscar Wilde wished to put certain of his, so that the moon might silver them by night and the sun gild them by day. Anybody can say something about anything—and they do it. They have always done it ; although not perhaps with the same dreadful command of our auditory nerves as they may purchase with their penny-weight of observation in the present. It is one of the most cherished of the liberties of the Englishman ; and, as Mr. Wells says, “This here Progress—it goes on.” Anybody can say something about anything ; but what they say need not be criticism, it may be comment. Ours is the day in which comment rules, and criticism is hard put to it to deny its name to the pretender. It is the apotheosis of the irrelevant. The day has come of which Matthew Arnold spoke when he said that as soon as we got an idea or half an idea, we should be running out into the street with it. Little boys run out into the street with our halves of ideas, and they sell them, with all the world’s news and the starting prices, for a halfpenny.

Wherein does criticism differ from the

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usurper? It differs from it first of all in its independence of the practical spirit; and this is the other part of what Matthew Arnold meant. The practical spirit may manifest itself in various ways, and is always irrelevant to the true spirit of criticism. The practical spirit manifests itself, on the lowest plane, in the institution of the Quid Pro Quo. I wish to proceed here with great caution. It is probable that what is known as reviewing has at all times had, in certain places, a sinister unacknowledged cousinship with the principle of something for something. It is always possible for a publisher to say (I do not say that there is such a publisher), "I will give you free copies of my books and my advertisements, and you will give me a good selling notice." It is always conceivable that a manager may say (I am not so much as hinting at his existence), "I will give you free tickets for the theatre and the opportunity of much cheap matter for your journal, and you will give me a good line for my posters." It is always credible that one young novelist may say to another young novelist (credible, but no more), "I

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praised your last novel as hardly inferior to Turgeniev, and it would be nice of you if you would praise my next novel as better than Balzac." This, when and if and though it might happen, would be mere commercial organisation and universal providing. This would be out-Harroding Harrod. According to this interpretation, the critic's burden would be no other in kind than that other burden, sung by the poet.

By open speech and simple,
An hundred times made plain,
To seek another's profit,
And work another's gain.

But irrelevancy may go deeper.

There is the comment of the coteries. This may be as free as is possible from the commercial guile. This is a form of fellow-feeling, a kind of instinct of gregariousness, very difficult to be angry with. At times it is hardly separable from the spirit which animates a band of brothers, who have grown up and done their work and settled into security together. This it is which animates those painters' widows, who write to

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the newspapers deprecating that the truth should be spoken of the art of one of their number, who has left a wife and children whose feelings may be hurt. It is often beautiful, but it is rarely relevant.

There is the irrelevance dictated by the practical spirit in the interest of social morality, according to one private opinion or another. This is as old as Stephen Gosson's *School o' Abuse*, or Jeremy Collier's *Short View of the Immorality of the English Stage*. No one would call Collier a good *critic*; he is not so good a critic of the Comedy of Manners as Macaulay, and that is not saying much, for Macaulay too was confined within the limits of his case. Collier confuses Congreve with Otway, because they are "immoral," in the worst manner of Mr. Bernard Shaw preferring Mr. Henry Arthur Jones before Wilde, because Mr. Jones is "serious." Collier was a good *man*, oh yes; and we have a number of his kind to-day.

The irrelevance which was dictated by the practical spirit in the interest of politics has all but died in England. The Tory papers would

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not now kill Keats because he was a Cockney, and the protégé of Radicals ; they would consider his circumstances an additional interest in his discovery, and would overlook his politics. The poems by a “chemist’s assistant” would go into fifteen large editions, particularly if it could be hinted that he wrote them at the counter. The furnaces of the Hell-fire critics are dead and cold. Our comment may not always be criticism, but it is almost invariably kind.

Meredith in *Rhoda Fleming* took a gloomy view of all this. “The office of critic, is now, in fact,” he said, “virtually extinct ; the taste for tickling and slapping is universal and imperative. . . . There are captains of the legions, but no critics.” Comment, then, is the business of saying something, a business highly and completely organised, and therefore, it is to be supposed, lucrative to someone. It is the great obscurer of values in our day. They order this matter better in France.

III

“A GENUINE criticism should, as I take it,” said Hazlitt, “reflect the colours, the light and shade, the soul and body of a work.” I turn to my Dictionary, and I find that it does not agree with Hazlitt. I find that while the word critic need, according to its origin, bear no meaning but that of a pronouncer of judgments, it does actually bear the primary meaning (in the opinion of my Dictionary) of a pronouncer of adverse judgments, a censorious person. Now this is extraordinary! I take up the most influential of the weekly critical journals (which surely will know), and I read: “This is not a work to criticise, but to enjoy light-heartedly.” And why is this “not a work to criticise”?—is there something in the act of criticism which is inimical, nay, which is antithetical, to the act of light-hearted enjoyment? Are all our critics, then, to be men of heavy heart, and heavier pens? Are they to be weighed down with the professional pack of their learning, and bent

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with the burden of delivering judgment? Are they to be tired persons, worn with the daily task of speaking ill, or of speaking well (their more likely task, despite my Dictionary), or of speaking *in propria persona* at all, who slip out of their critical garments with the delight we may imagine the sewerman to experience in doffing his overalls, or the exhausted grocer in putting off his apron and leaving his scales and the thousand tedious commodities of the counter? I think not; I think not with all my heart. This popular misconception of the critic as a censorious person will have to be got rid of altogether. No longer must it be with a connotation of reproach that one hears (in the columns of the weekly critical journals at least), "Oh, but you're so *critical*." The only possible answer, for the critic, is, "Yes, madam, that is what I conceive myself to be paid to be."

Nevertheless the idea that the critic is a censorious person dies hard in England. Not all the kindness of our comment has sufficed to kill it. Partly, I think, the reason is that in our literary history precept has not, on any notable

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occasion, preceded practice; as Lessing in Germany came before Goethe and Schiller. It really seems that, in other spheres as well as the political, our national genius is for doing things and for discovering afterwards what we have done. It is an admirable method; but it has this minor and incidental hardship, that criticism in England does not easily get recognised as a constructive force. Certainly the criticism of the arts in England was a long time in earning the title. It was incidental. One may have found delightful remarks in More or Ascham, but they were not what the books were written for. As for the formal criticism of the period, I do not imagine that any thirsty reader ever got much refreshment from George Puttenham (if it was George, and not his brother Richard). And as for Sidney's *Defence of Poesie*, it is mostly taken up with answering back at Gosson—a profitless business; so that if it were not for the nice chivalrous spirit of the man, his *Defence* would be nearly as deservedly forgotten as Congreve's answer back at Collier, and as Shelley's later and rather overweening *Defence*

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would be, if it had its strict merits. This attitude of the defensive is rarely a critical attitude of much service ; because the arguments that are met are always irrelevant. Sidney, one means, did nothing to forecast Shakespeare ; no more than Mr. Bernard Shaw in *A Dramatic Realist to his Critics* did to forecast Hauptmann. If Shakespeare had written prefaces, we should have had some criticism ; but he was a wise man who knew that it wasn't his business. Jonson scraped together some good ideas ; and then, I suppose, we come to Dryden, who knew all the rules of the game, and whose importance is that he was the first man to co-ordinate them. One imagines that, if you had done anything at all in letters under Dryden, you could not but have been aware of him ; any more than, if you had lived a century later, you could have ignored Dr. Johnson. They remained rules, of course—“ th'exactest rules ”—but you never know when Dryden will transcend them ; if not in his plays, or poems, then in his criticism, as in the admirable passages distinguishing between Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Dryden is the first of the

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craftsmen-critics. Pope on critics is very amusing and contemporaneous, contemporaneous with ourselves, that is to say. But one would hardly call the *Essay on Criticism* constructive. As for the commentators of the eighteenth century, Johnson had his fling at them when he said that Warburton would make two-and-fifty Theobalds cut into slices, but the worst of Warburton was that he had a rage for saying something when there was nothing to be said. It was Johnson who said, when a certain mild gentleman had asserted the contrary opinion : “ Why no, Sir ; this is not just reasoning. You *may* abuse a tragedy, though you cannot write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables.” That is the critic’s Declaration of Rights ; and here is his declaration of duties. The occasion was Mrs. Montague, a lady distinguished for having written an *Essay on Shakespeare*. “ REYNOLDS : I think that essay does her honour. JOHNSON : Yes, Sir, it does *her* honour, but it would do nobody else honour. I have indeed, not read it

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all. But when I take up the end of a web, and find it packthread, I do not expect, by looking further, to find embroidery. Sir, I will venture to say, there is not one sentence of true criticism in her book. GARRICK : But, Sir, surely it shews how much Voltaire has mistaken Shakespeare, which nobody else has done. JOHNSON : Sir, nobody else has thought it worth while. And what merit is there in that ? You may as well praise a schoolmaster for whipping a boy who has construed ill. No, Sir, there is no real criticism in it: none shewing the beauty of thought, as formed on the workings of the human heart." That is a picture of the critic among the commenters—wise, admirable, witty fellows, but commenters.

I think that the influence of Johnson on those critics who came after him, on Coleridge, on Lamb, on Hazlitt, on Leigh Hunt, must have been quite incalculable. If Johnson was not a constructive critic (his care that the Whig dogs got the worst of it was not quite perfectly scientific, if it was human), he is the mighty and abiding instance of the benefit con-

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ferred by the destructive critic in whose rocky and laughing presence the false good and the foolish irrelevant cannot live. To meet Dr. Johnson, even to-day, is to receive a challenge to produce your critical values. If he was not himself a constructive critic, he was the cause of constructive criticism in others. Thus Hazlitt, in defending his own criticism of Shakespeare against the criticism of the commentators and the Ultra-Crepidareans,¹ did but carry further the ridicule which Johnson had begun. One may see Johnson as the great forerunner of the Renascence of criticism, which quite properly was one with the general movement in literature which Mr. Watts-Dunton has called the Renascence of Wonder. As the poets awoke with surprise to nature, the critics awoke with surprise to letters. One may find Hazlitt a better critic than Coleridge, whose inspired flashes have their complement in a vast

¹ A term which Hazlitt applied to Gifford, but which was invented by Leigh Hunt. Mr. Max Beerbohm has called the Ultra-Crepidareans of our own day the dullards who think that criticism consists in spotting mistakes.

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deal of smoke. Coleridge's criticism, too, has the defect of all system makers ; there comes a time when he is more interested in the universal metaphysical sufficiency of his system than in the real differences of things. One may find Hazlitt, apart altogether from the other comparative beauties of the men, a better critic than Lamb ; Lamb happened to be awake more fully to the virtues of the lesser Elizabethans, but Hazlitt would not have made the mistake Lamb made with regard to the comic writers of the Restoration. Hazlitt, indeed, did not make it ; he supplied without effort the perfect and efficient key to their appreciation, which fits the lock of their treasury to this day. Lamb, one feels, natural critic though he was, exercised his gift with a rather more sedulous regard to the demands of his own day. As for Leigh Hunt, he was just a good fellow ; sensitive enough, but not so profoundly sensible of the critic's task as to feel no pain when Hazlitt in his judgments over-rode the prime irrelevance of friendship. Mr. Augustine Birrell, in his timid and cautionary little book, takes Hazlitt to task for speaking the

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truth about Coleridge and Wordsworth ; but surely it is possible to see to-day that it was the truth ? What Hazlitt did was for twenty-five years to speak the truth about the things of art as he saw them. He wore himself out by giving to the magazines and journals criticism, when comment would have pleased them just as well. " If theatrical criticisms were only written when there is something worth writing about," he said, " it would be hard upon us who live by them." Writing about things that were worth while and were not worth while, he never failed in genuine criticism ; he never failed, I think, in an " intelligent sympathy." And when he died he said, " Well, I've had a happy life." " You say I want *imagination*," he once wrote to Leigh Hunt. " If you mean invention or fancy, I say so too ; but if you mean a disposition to sympathise with the claims or merits of others, I deny it." He recognised Keats for what he was, and did not wait, with the modern deference to posterity, the statutory number of years after his death to do it. Scott he corrected, not in anger (in spite of the most insurmountable

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political differences), but with judgment, as in the Book of Common Prayer we ask that we may be corrected ; that is to say, he praised him for what is praiseworthy, he praised because he loved : Hazlitt is not only the best contemporary critic of the Waverley Novels, he is the best critic they have had to this day. He who exercises a constant independence of spirit (was his principle), and yet seldom gives offence by the freedom of his opinions, may be presumed to have a well-regulated mind. In an age that was a reaction against the eighteenth century he was not afraid to say what he liked in the eighteenth century—because he *did* like it ; he was not afraid to call Pope a poet. In an age that was all for giving its adherence to Germany, he did not feel disposed to give up his adherence to what he knew and loved of France. And yet one never feels him to have been an *intransigeant*. First and foremost his art was not the gentle art of making enemies. He was merely exceptionally free from all the cants which cloud the judgment ; from the cant of the Time Spirit, for example. His own instinctive and disciplined

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judgment was enough for him, that is all. Of course he was not free from what are called prejudices, for "we are only justified in rejecting prejudices," he said, "when we can explain the grounds of them ; or when they are at war with nature, which is the strongest prejudice of all." In effect, I am William Hazlitt, he said, and this is the work in question as my personality, stripped as clear as I can make it of irrelevancies, reflects it. It is likely that that is as near as we can come to the definition of the critic as the reflecting and recording instrument.

IV

FOR hammer as we may at the idea of impartiality, the critic remains the critic still, with the whole of his contributory value in his own person, as the whole of the value of the artist is in his. We shall ask that the critic have first the critic's nature, and then that he have the necessary checks upon it, which have been acquired in experience of the art of appraisal. But the critic is not by character a learned person ; he is at most the populariser of learning. Take the writer of criticism who embodies most clearly in the general conception the idea of an erudite impartiality, the calm, cool vigours of his craft ; and what, in Pater's *Marius*, is the critic's axiomatic principle ?—"To know when one's self is interested, is the first condition of interesting other people." The natural critic knows when he is interested with the ease and certainty with which the weather-glass knows it has experienced pressure ; and the corollary is that he knows with an equal ease and certainty

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when he is not interested. It is in vain to ask him to force his interest ; it is worse, it is destructive of his value, as though one were to quarrel with the household instrument that did not register fair weather. If the thermometer states the temperature of our room to be below what is pleasing, and we have reason to believe that the fire is gone out, we go into another room ; we do not hold a candle to the thermometer. If the clock asserts the hour to be one unpleasing to our fancy, we do not strike the clock across the face : the poor thing is doing its duty. But if we have reason to suspect our clock of an ill-regulated mind, we may leave its assertions unregarded and take our time from another. And we may do just the same with our critics. If the critic has liberty to record what has interested him, ours is an equal liberty to deny that we are interested. As Rousseau said, *Ma fonction est de dire la vérité, mais non pas de la faire croire.* And out of the multitude of voices will come truth. Truth is, after all, the thing that pleases a man, and he cannot ask that he have not to go out and seek his pleasure. The best of the

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critics, or all the critics together, can but point the way. And he is generally not the best of critics who claims that the truth as he sees it is the only truth, or even the whole of one of its aspects.

The natural critic, I take it, believes himself to be speaking the truth, or he would have no pleasure in speaking. His place is midway between that of the pontiffs, who deal in the slap-up article, and those critics, like Wilde, whose denial that one statement is any more true than its opposite is a form of perversion. To the young, Wilde is a very persuasive critic, because from his elegant dialogues in the Socratic form there emerges with a beautiful distinctness the truth that there is no truth, a truth which to the young is very palatable. It is akin to Mr. Bernard Shaw's golden rule that there are no golden rules. To the young, who have not yet seen performed the simple experiment of turning things inside out, it is an extremely pleasing experience to learn that life imitates art far more than art imitates life, or that it is very much more difficult to talk about a thing than

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to do it. To find Wilde completing a critical essay with the remark that while he believes every word of what he has written he would equally have believed every word if he had written the opposite, is like receiving a lesson in gentlemanly deportment. What a refreshing modesty! How charming an abnegation of the functions of tyrant! But Wilde does not, as the saying is, carry one very far. There is the highest utility in the provocative statement of the truth that art's business is not to imitate life, because there are millions of people (Ruskin was one of them) who have not yet got beyond the point at which they believe the business of art to be imitation. Similarly, in an age when criticism is hardly suffered to live, there is a usefulness in exalting the interpreter into a higher rank than that of the doer. In the assertion that there is no absolute truth there is the most absolute truth, if one may say so; but in failing to understand that there is such a thing as personal truth Wilde was merely unfortunate. He had no other idea but that an attitude was a thing one assumed; he had no idea of an atti-

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tude as a thing one found one's self in. And that is the reason why his critical attitude did not prove very satisfying, and has not proved very stable.

Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer has asked in our own day for a critical attitude; and in a day when it is far too often that of prostration, he is quite right. We do want to know where a man stands. Mr. Hueffer's entreaty, if one understood it aright, was that a man should name his gods; that he should put his cards on the table; that he should be on the register of the Medical Council or known at Tattersall's, as it were. He may have suggested a form of competitive entry, and that a man should earn by the composition of a thesis the right to crawl over Shakespeare or to attach himself to the hand of Miss Brontë. I do not know. Mr. Hueffer's own gods, one understands, are Flaubert, Maupassant, and Turgeniev, and when he delivers a judgment one knows that these great men have been in the opposite basket. Now this is admirable; we know where we stand. And yet I seem to perceive a danger. Wilde

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was right when he said that it is dangerous to name one's gods. One would not wish to exclude the critic who, when challenged, was not conscious that he had referred the object under consideration to any judgment but his own. There is the danger that if you have made up your mind where excellence lives, that you will not go down another street which looks different. But the critic has got to go down. He has got to go down to the rushes, or he can never get the ball. Mr. Hueffer is a leading member of a modern school of craftsmen-critics, in which Mr. Henry James is headmaster, a school which marks a great advance upon Swinburne, whose critical attitude (one says nothing of the artist) was that of the hen in the farmyard ; we know she has found something by the noise she makes, but it is just as likely to be a pebble as a gem.

Pater's "extraordinary patience, and piercing powers of vision to see things 'as they are' by first ascertaining how they are to him," have been noted by another admirable critic of the same hierarchy, the late Lionel Johnson, who

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died too young. Pater made “appreciations” and he made “portraits,” and while the best criticism is always happiest in giving adequate recognition and in securing a rise in value, there is in general no better word for its product than the “portrait”; for is not the task of criticism very like the task of painting a portrait—the making of the picture of another that is yet a picture of one’s self? Ruskin did good work, in poking his rather cumbersome fun, for example, at Twickenham Classicism, “the class of poetry in which a farmer’s girl is spoken of as a ‘nymph,’ and a farmer’s boy as a ‘swain,’ and in which throughout a ridiculous and unnatural refinement is supposed to exist in rural life, merely because the poet himself has neither had the courage to endure its hardships nor the wit to conceive its realities”; but Ruskin made the mistake of naming his gods too early, and all his life it is likely that he did what Mr. Robert Blatchford has said of Gladstone, he talked too much to be a useful thinker. John Addington Symonds had the wit and the patience to preserve a clear head on naturalism and idealism

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in painting when much nonsense was being talked on these things ; nothing could be better, for example, than his comparison between Caravaggio and Zola. Bagehot's was the criticism of the plain man, and it may always be read with pleasure ; it has but little power of illumination, but he knows what he thinks as clearly of the English constitution as of Shakespeare, and we know what he thinks too. And that perhaps, with an added word to note the extra spice of personality, is what one would say of the late Mr. Andrew Lang.

Criticism has been defined by Mr. Arthur Symons as a valuation of forces, which is indifferent to their direction. It is a conception of the critical task which he has himself notably and beautifully exemplified ; Mr. Symons is one of the most delicate of recording instruments. He has set himself against work as diverse as that of the French Symbolists, of the Elizabethan dramatists, and of the Victorian music-halls, and has registered impressions with unwilful exactitude. But are we to accept this indifference to direction as a defining condition

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in our conception of the critic ? What becomes of Hazlitt's "Nature, which is the strongest prejudice of all" ? I do not think we need accept it so. Not, that is to say, in regard to the individual critic. Abstract criticism, oh yes, that will be indifferent to direction ; because all directions will have their representative. But we need not ask the individual critic to go against his nature ; to isolate it in cold storage ; to chain it while he does some delicate business, as one has to chain an over-cheerful dog. He may keep it to accompany him, if he has but properly disciplined it to the work. The abstract ideal of criticism is that emanation of truth which would issue from the arena of the arts and denote the vigour of their being as the dust-cloud denotes the field of battle. And in this spirit it is that we may welcome the Futurists and the Post-Futurists, not because we are indifferent to their direction—it is even possible that we may think their Future a most unpleasant direction—but because of the disturbance they give to the false, comfortably seated opinion that art is imitation.

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Our ideal critic, perhaps, will practise always a certain aloofness ; true to the caution which characterises him in going into battle, for it is not his function. His is the second's place in the arena, the place of the privileged watcher-on at the arts and life. Mr. Bernard Shaw was a successful critic ; successful not only in getting himself listened to but in achieving his practical aim—which was to open the theatre to his plays. But Mr. Shaw's criticism, *qua* criticism, was oversimplified ; it consisted in sitting in the theatre and, when people behind him wept, in telling them they had better have laughed, and when they laughed, in proving to them it had been better had they wept. Mr. Shaw's criticism is criticism *à clef* ; when he was guardian of the dramatic Pantheon he let M. Brieux in on Molière's heels, for no better reason than that M. Brieux's key was in some respects the duplicate of Mr. Shaw's. There is another, naturally far more belligerent, person, Mr. Gilbert Chesterton, who is yet a better critic than Mr. Bernard Shaw. His likeness to Hazlitt does not stop short at a certain inability quite to catch

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quotations ; his sensibility to, and retentiveness of, what really matters, is at least equally to be noted. Mr. Chesterton is a natural critic, and one is glad to know that he is there. Mr. Walkley is the great exponent in the theatres of Hazlitt's maxim that good criticism does not result only when there is something worth writing about. But perhaps, of all the writers of our day, we are surest of Mr. Max Beerbohm. Hanging there elegant upon the outskirts of the time, conscious with Hamlet that the hand of little employment hath the daintier sense, one of us and yet the intimate and equal of those of whom he writes, he is, we know, a critic. He has, too, his cards on the table ; but they are wont to be not visiting cards, inscribed with the names of the great, but cards in that lottery in which we all are participants—habits, and fancies, and ingredients of mood and mind. We know him, we like, in the words of the song, his style and size : we delegate him to do our duty for us. And that is our final compliment to the critic, for, as Mr. Puff says in the comedy, the number of those who undergo the

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fatigue of judging for themselves is very small indeed.

But there is one more species of over-simplification before we have done with our summary (which is itself an example of over-simplification). Nordau made himself ridiculous by indicting an age. The Nietzscheans come springing fully armed from the head of their parent, ready to dispose of all the art that is subsequent to the Pyramid with a few sharp, short words of command. We do not love these people, we do not recognise the truth of many of the words they say, nor is the surprise they give us a pleasant surprise. They have fallen captive to the lure of the over-simplified. I do not think that we love the Frenchman Bergson, whose theory of the comic suits Molière very fairly but which does not suit Fielding and which makes Shakespeare look, in his less superb moments, what Voltaire called him. Perhaps these people are the victims of their values. Perhaps they are better at getting their hat on the head of the patient than at fitting the head of the patient with a hat. They deal in but one article,

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and they believe in its special ability to cover all heads. They have no out-sizes in their emporium, and, above all, no half-sizes. They are not among the best of critics, because they have no idea of, no natural love for, "pointing out the real differences of things."

V

ANY sort of soul can have adventures among masterpieces—the lady, for example, who threw a butcher's knife at the Venus of Velasquez ; the point at which the adventures begin to interest us is the point at which criticism begins. The adventures must be real, and they must be relevant ; as the critical adventures of M. Anatole France have been. When the late Francis Thompson, in his celebrated Essay on Shelley, spoke of his subject's "fondness for apparently futile amusements, such as the sailing of paper boats," he went on to add, "Very possibly in the paper boat he saw the magic bark of Laon or Cythna." Now very possibly Shelley saw in the paper boat a paper boat, the sailing of which on little turbulent streams is a good enough employment even for a poet, who cannot be engaged for ever with his poetry. The comment of Thompson is an unreal comment, a something pretty-pretty, a piece of embroidery on an idea not otherwise distinguished. We do not want our criticism to

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foster the belief that poets live on lotus, or walk the beaten pavement with vine-leaves in their hair ; any fool of a twopenny scribbler can lend himself to that work. The reason why Boswell is a magnificent piece of criticism as well as a magnificent piece of biography is because it gives us a man and not a giant ; the author may have been a fop, but he was not the kind of fop who would have us believe he was always in his dress clothes, nor his master either. The business of criticism is to assist reality, and it does an ill deed when it goes into the contrary service and lends itself to the obscuration of values. There is an amiable type of writer who, mistaking the duty and privilege of criticism to be based upon the personal, will lead up to a play by an account of what he ate for dinner and will make less of the author's third act than of the circumstance that at this point a lady seated behind him, readjusting the position of her dismounted head-gear, drove a pin into his back. Now this is an abuse of the personal, which can be rendered tolerable only by some singular charm in the narrator, and

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which can never be, one thinks, a grant in aid to the purest critical understanding. The critic must steel himself against these pricks, and do his service by the presented object in simpleness and duty. It is by means such as these that the demand has come that criticism should be impersonal. But criticism, whether it be signed with the name and address of the writer as Mr. Bernard Shaw would have it, or whether it bear merely the imprimatur of the standing of its journal, is signed all over if it be worth the paper it is written on. The personality of the art does not lie in the ego, or a painter's work would be unrecognisable when it was not a self-portrait, and a novel by Mr. Hardy cease to be a novel by Mr. Hardy when it abandoned the *oratio recta*. The question of whether the critic say "I" or "we" or "one" or "the present writer" is of the smallest importance, so long as it is the personal truth he speaks; and the personal truth, not about his antecedents or his liver (this is where the essayist may have the advantage of him), but about the necessary business that is then to be considered. There

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are publishers who will dress a book so vilely that the reader of taste cannot bring himself to read it, there are theatre managers who will stifle us in our seats or incommodate our vision with a pillar, there are picture-galleries where one can hardly preserve a foothold for the hard, uncomfortable brilliance of the floor ; but the critic, of all men, will not suffer himself to be put by these things off the novel, the play, or the picture, or he will be guilty, not of criticism, but of an irrelevancy of comment which is the same in kind as those of which we have already spoken.

The immediate need, then, of the present day is for criticism, and criticism, and for yet more criticism. I do not see how there can well be too much. But it must be criticism. It is illustrative of the desuetude into which criticism has fallen that although a journal called the *Critic* flourished almost without intermission from Smollett's day until our own, the journal which at present bears that title is a journal whose interests are limited to the movements of the markets. It is as though those were the only things whose colours, whose light and shade,

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whose soul and body, our age cared exactly to reflect. There are excellent critics of the game of golf ; there are critics of football, of the Rugby code especially, who do their work so admirably, that one harbours secret wishes that they might be guilty of malversation, and so, like Hazlitt, write not only of Neate versus the Gas-man. I do not say that we have no literary criticism : there would be the literary supplement of *The Times*, for example, with an increased public and an unreduced integrity, standing there to refute me. But I do think that two things are incontestable : one, that in the general rush and outpour from the press, literary evaluations are mixed or altogether wanting ; and the other, that for the natural critic to live by the genuine practice of his craft is more difficult than it should be. The words of the Scriptures have been altered, and we now learn that man cannot live by criticism alone. One does not wish, one would not expect, that in the industry of letters his should be the primary “ pull ” ; as we have seen, the critic’s is but a secondary function. By the nature of things, he it is who is

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the residual claimant ; but if the recognition were but more clear that he, if not the creator of wealth, was at least the conserver of values, it is difficult to believe that this could be other than good for the system of letters.

One would like, then, to see the critic's function more generously recognised by the consuming public in England. It is a significant thing that while the least line of Sheridan's play of *The Critic* is familiar in our mouth as household words, very little is known or cared about the Duke of Buckingham's play of the *Rehearsal*. Both are delightful plays, but the difference is that while the earlier play makes fun of a dramatist, the play which owes a great deal to it makes fun of the critics. And very properly, too, for there, in Mr. Puff, and Mr. Sneer, and Mr. Dangle, you have the lot of them, the pretending usurpers. But the point is this, that the success of Sheridan's satire is broad-based upon the popular misconception of the critic as a censorious person :

Those men of spleen, who fond the world should
know it,

Sit down, and for their twopence damn a poet—

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as one of his Restoration predecessors had it. A great deal of sentimental nonsense has been talked about the English treatment of the artist ; the English love an artist, if he do but take pains enough to bring himself to their notice, by death or other means. But the English have never yet been brought to see the point of the critic ; and for what they do not see the point of, the English will not pay. Small blame to them, either ; the critic is a small enough point in all conscience, though he have served for a peg to hang this little book upon.

One would like, also, to see the function of criticism more clearly and generally separated from that of creative production. If I were a creative artist I would no more wish to do my own criticism than to do my own washing, or to protect my own shores. And yet, all around us, the work of impartial estimation is being entrusted to those who are themselves, or to those who would be, prime workers in the arts. Partly it is the belief deep inlaid in humanity that it is safer to tend one's own territory ; it is very annoying to grow nice daffodils in your country

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garden, and to have the rabbits eat them. It was in this spirit that Charles Reade wrote the review of *The Cloister and the Hearth* over another signature, rather than let the delicate business out of his own hands. Partly (but one would not make too much of this) it is the motive of the Quid Pro Quo. Partly it is for lack of a clear discrimination in those in authority; they have not seen, or they have lost touch with, the desirability of a journal which is the distinct organ of a craft, that of the critical. Partly, of course, it is the public, which puts up with what it gets, and gets what it puts up with. One is not saying, in saying this, anything at all in dispraise of the criticism which Keats put into his letters, which the authors of *Lyrical Ballads* put into their prefaces, or the late J. M. Synge into his. Of course when the creative artist speaks of his art, there is the highest possible gain in our listening. Of course the new band of craftsmen-critics, in so far as they are a band and in so far as they are new (for the two functions of creator and critic have never been wholly separable) are entirely to be welcomed. One

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would still like to see the separate recognition of the critic, in virtue of the separate nature of his craft. There is an admirable analogy and apology for that craft, and one which to the artists should be placatory ; for do we not, by firing into the clouds, bring down their rain more plenteously ?

What is a critic ? asked the Actor-Manager, and did not stay for an answer.

It happens that William Hazlitt answered the Actor-Manager's question, and on both the counts on the consideration of which we have ended. Of criticism's right, he wrote in *On Judging of Pictures* :—

“ I deny in toto and at once the exclusive right and power of painters to judge of pictures. What is a picture made for ? To convey certain ideas to the mind of a painter—that is, of one man in ten thousand ? No, but to make them apparent to the eye and mind of all. If a picture be admired by none but painters, I think it is a strong presumption that the picture is bad. A painter is no more a judge, I suppose, than another man of

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how people feel and look under certain passions and events. Everybody sees as well as he whether certain figures on the canvas are like such a man, or like a cow, a tree, a bridge or a windmill. . . .

“To go into the higher branches of art—the poetry of painting—I deny still more peremptorily the exclusiveness of the initiated. It might as well be said that none but those who could write a play have any right to sit on the third row in the pit, on the first night of a new tragedy ; nay, there is more plausibility in the one than the other. No man can judge of poetry without possessing in some measure a poetical mind ; it need not be of that degree necessary to create, but it must be equal to taste and to analyse. . . .

“I may know what is a just or a beautiful representation of love, anger, madness, despair, without being able to draw a straight line ; and I do not see how that faculty adds to the capability of so judging.”

And of criticism’s duty, he wrote in that *Letter to William Gifford* which will serve for all time as the retort of the natural observer upon the

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fortified Zoilist, of the true critic upon the merely censorious person. He spoke of the functions of criticism ; “ but you,” he said, “ are a nuisance, and should be abated.”

“ My account of Titian and Vandyke’s colouring, appears to you very odd, because it is like the things described, and you have no idea of the things described. If I had described the style of these two painters in terms applicable to them both, and to all other painters, you would have thought the precision of the style equal to the justness of the sentiment. . . . It is the pointing out the real differences of things that offends you, for you have no idea of what is meant. . . .

“ I have some love of fame, of the fame of a Pascal, or Leibnitz, or a Berkeley (none at all of popularity), and would rather that a single inquirer after truth should pronounce my name, after I am dead, with the same feelings that I have thought of theirs, than be puffed in all the newspapers, and praised in all the reviews, while I am living. . . .”

There speaks the critic, and we may leave him

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speaking, for we shall not hear a better. And if anybody expected this little book to be a history of criticism from the earliest times to the present, I hereby refer him to Professor George Saintsbury's great work on that subject.

BY P. P. HOWE

THE REPERTORY THEATRE
DRAMATIC PORTRAITS

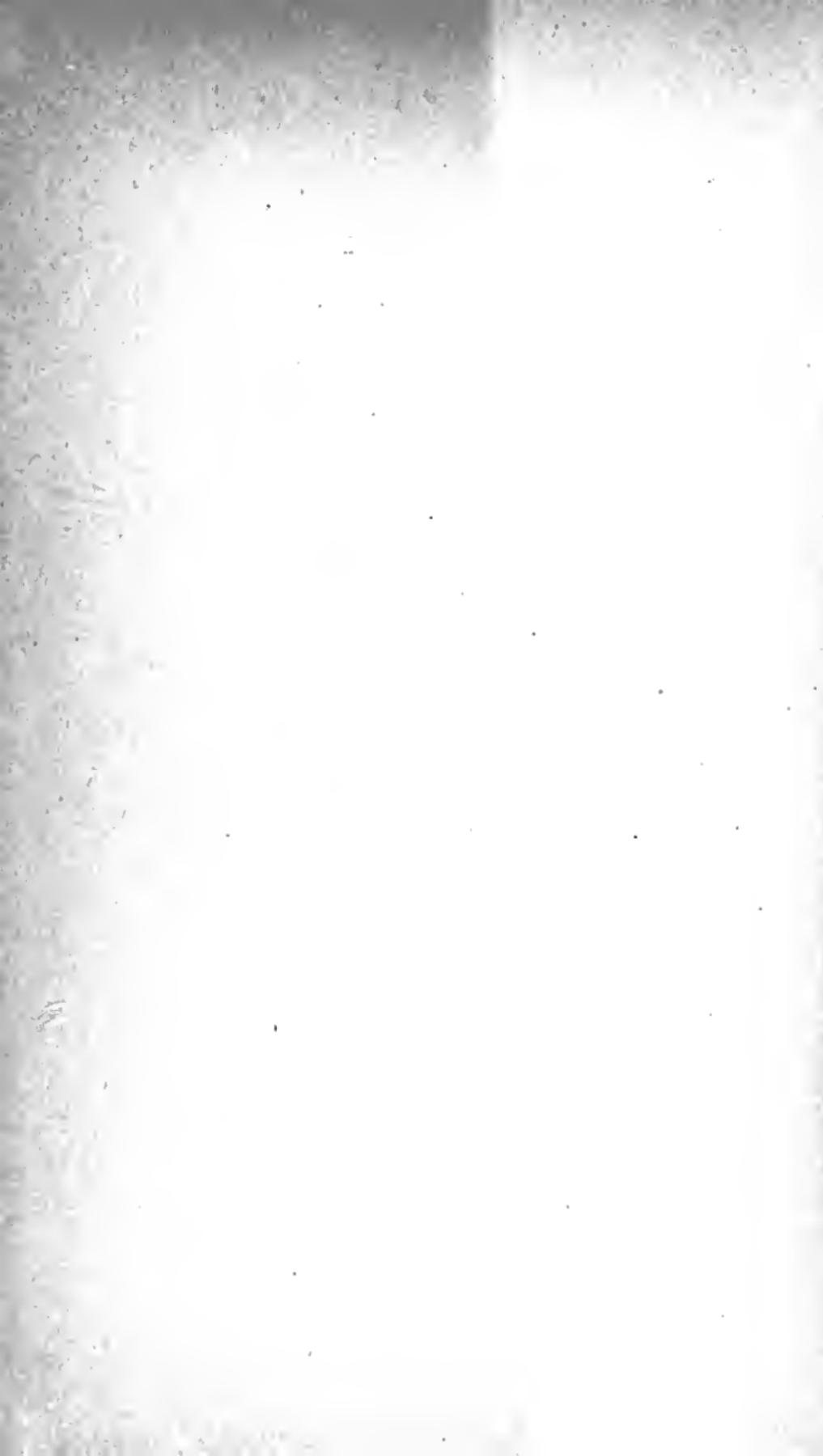
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